

The Anti-Semitic Hoax That Refuses to Die

The New York Times

April 21, 2006

EXHIBITION REVIEW

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

Washington

A SMALL cloth is draped over each digit of a giant hand, each finger puppet inscribed with a symbol. One is a dollar sign: a reference to international capital in all its manifestations. There is also the sign of the Masons, since for centuries that secret society has been caricatured as insidious and manipulative, without recognizing, perhaps, that its own strings were being pulled.

There is the hammer and sickle, symbolizing a Communist world that no longer possesses fearsome power but was once, apparently, under the sway of an even greater master. The cross is there, for the church has supposedly been enslaved by the same forces. And there is a swastika, for even Nazism, according to this particular vision, arose out of the deep maneuverings of a group prepared to sacrifice six million of its own so its larger aims might be realized in the creation of an imperial state.

And controlling them all is the hand, its palm inscribed with a Jewish star.

Such is the cover art for a Spanish-language edition of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" published last year in Mexico.

Mexico is not alone. Look around the small space allotted to a new exhibition opening today at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum here — "A Dangerous Lie: The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" — and the intensity and extent of agreement are striking. For more than a century "The Protocols" has made its way into many languages, selling untold numbers of copies, portraying Jews as demonic schemers.

Said to be the minutes of a secret council of Jews discussing their plot for world domination, this slim volume, first published in Russia in 1905, has become a nearly

sacred text for political and religious movements ranging from American nativism and German Nazism to Arab Islamicism.

Henry Ford was captivated by the idea of Jewish financiers plotting to undermine the United States; he became a proselytizer for "The Protocols" in his newspaper, The Dearborn Independent. [Hitler](#), an admirer of Ford, was introduced to "The Protocols" by the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, and cited it in "Mein Kampf." More than 23 editions of "The Protocols" were published by the Nazi party over 20 years.

During the last half-century, it has also become a canonical text in the Islamic world. One edition on display here, printed in Pakistan in 1969, was presented by King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to state visitors in the 1970's, its jacket showing a snake, representing the Jews, wrapped around the crescent of Islam while casting its glance over the entire Eastern Hemisphere. Another edition is an Arabic translation of "The Protocols" that was posted on the Palestinian State Information Services Web site until protests led to its removal last year.

Now "The Protocols" would presumably be affirmed with less embarrassment: the Palestinian Authority is presently controlled by the militant Islamist organization [Hamis](#), whose 1988 covenant could almost be read as a rewrite of "The Protocols." "Our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious," that covenant says. "With their money, they took control of the world media, news agencies, the press, publishing houses, broadcasting stations and others," it declares of Jews.

"They aim at undermining societies, destroying values, corrupting consciences, deteriorating character and annihilating Islam," it says, asserting that Jews were behind the French and Russian revolutions, the Freemasons, the Rotary Clubs, imperialism, the two world wars, the [United Nations](#), the drug trade and alcoholism. It cites a source: "Their plan is embodied in 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.' "

Unfortunately, this exhibition, organized by Daniel Greene, while illuminating as far as it goes, doesn't do more than briefly refer to that charter. It also only cursorily summarizes the perspective of the various editions of "The Protocols" on display. And the text of "The Protocols" itself can be read only on two pages of an open book.

Evidence that "The Protocols" was forged is scarcely more detailed, revealed primarily in a wall-size reproduction of part of the 1921 Times of London exposé that demonstrated

that the book was cribbed from an 1864 polemic by the French writer Maurice Joly attacking Napoleon III: "Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and Montesquieu." The words of Joly's villain, Machiavelli, were later put into the mouths of conspiratorial Jews.

But what an opportunity was missed in not doing more with this exhibition!

For the tale of how this volume was forged — which only recently came to light with the release of Soviet-era files, suggesting that it was written by Mathieu Golovinski, a Russian exile living in France in 1898 — is remarkable in itself. So are the peculiarities of its sources, which also include an 1868 novel, "Biarritz" by Hermann Goedsche, which describes a nocturnal meeting of rabbis in a Prague cemetery, where they discuss plans for world domination. So a royalist Russian used the fantastical imaginings of a German and the antiroyalist text of a Frenchman imitating the arguments of an Italian, in order to defame Jews.

The text itself also demands more analysis. One reason for its resiliency despite its demonstrably faked origins is that it is not just another anti-Semitic tract. Its intellectual trappings reflect something profound about anti-Semitism itself.

Conspiracy theorists abound in all arenas, of course, and there is surely something satisfying about seeing varied sources of villainy so swiftly click into place as manifestations of a single master plan. Advocates of "The Protocols" are undeterred by evidence that the book is forged: it reveals, they say, a higher truth.

That truth, though, is not really about Jews. Reading the text itself (which can be found at ddickerson.igc.org/protocols.html), one is shocked not at its anti-Semitism, but at its knotty, pseudophilosophic assertions; "The Protocols" really is ersatz Machiavelli. It is astounding that something so difficult has been so appealing.

"Men with bad instincts are more in number than the good," states its opening sally; they are "beasts of prey" who can only be governed by cunning. Their greatest delusion, asserts the purportedly Jewish narrator, is their growing belief in liberalism. But political freedom is a "bait," being offered to them by Jews, who are using it to undermine the traditional order. Soon societies everywhere, the narrator says, will fall prey to the "despotism of capital, which is entirely in our hands."

A catalog of threatening modernity is being boasted of: liberal rights proliferate, faith falters, commerce rules, citizens are seduced by "corruption and luxury." "Think carefully of the successes we arranged for Darwinism, Marxism, Nietzscheism," the Jews in "The Protocols" say, and look what "disintegrating" effect these ideas have had. These Jews claim to be undermining the world with "disenchantments" in order to take it over.

This forgery encapsulates the image of the cosmopolitan Jew as the unprincipled molder of modernity.

But modernity and liberalism are never really meant seriously by these Jews; the ideas are manipulations, fabrications. In addition these Jews sound as if they could confirm [Al Qaeda](#) or Islamist movements in their indictments against the West. The Jews of "The Protocols," in their determination to dissolve national boundaries in pursuit of power and profit, could also as easily be associated with globalization, inspiring anti-Americanism as much as anti-Semitism. "The Protocols" feeds into a wide variety of resentments and longings for a premodern world.

But the really astonishing thing is this: These Jews, in secretly planning to overturn the very forces of liberalism and modernity they have just created are doing just what their anti-Semitic nemeses desire. That is not the only point of agreement. Look at the Jews' approach in "The Protocols." They believe in absolute power. They will brook no opposition. They will use the rights and values of liberalism to undermine it, exploiting its weaknesses. They will be patient and ruthless and unrelenting.

Hitler once said he used similar techniques for similar ends. He did. So do the Islamists. If "The Protocols" has found such resonance among anti-Semites across the world, it is partly because, in its villainous Jews, they see images of what they yearn to be.